

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1-B

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Contras claim kill of Soviet 'Hind'

By Tom Diaz
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A spokesman for Nicaraguan resistance forces said yesterday that rebel forces shot down a Soviet-made Mi-24 Hind helicopter gunship flown by Cuban pilots during fighting in Nicaragua Monday.

"We shot down an Mi-24 on Dec. 2 at about 5:30 p.m. with a ground-to-air SAM-7 missile," Bosco Matamoros, spokesman for the Unified Nicaraguan Opposition, said in Washington. "Two Cuban pilots perished when it crashed."

Mr. Matamoros said the helicopter gunship was downed in fighting near the city of Matagalpa while it was "strafing our forces and some villages."

The claim, if correct, would mark the first downing of a Hind gunship by the rebel forces in the Nicaraguan war.

The Hinds are considered to be the Marxist Sandinista regime's most effective weapon against the rebel forces. Most Western sources estimate that the Sandinista government has six Hinds in its inventory,

although some believe as many as 12 may be in service.

The helicopters, known as "flying tanks" because of their devastating firepower and heavy armor, are also used by Soviet forces in Afghanistan and Cuban forces in Angola.

According to wire-service reports from Managua, the Sandinista Ministry of Defense confirmed in a statement issued yesterday that a military helicopter crashed Monday in mountains in north-central Nicaragua, about 85 miles northeast of Managua, and said all 14 soldiers aboard were killed.

"A helicopter, on a combat mission, crashed as it was transporting companions of the Sandinista Popular Army to war zones," the brief statement said.

But the statement did not say what type of helicopter was involved or how it was downed. The Sandinista military also uses Soviet-made Mi-8 Hip helicopters, which are used primarily as troop transports.

Mr. Matamoros said the helicopter was shot down by "the forces of regional command Jorge Salazar

No. 1." He said it took several days for word of the downing to be relayed to Washington.

Resistance leaders expressed frustration in recent interviews at their forces' inability to shoot down any of the helicopters in the past. The Hinds are difficult to shoot down because they are built in such a way as to avoid tracking by heat-seeking missiles such as the SAM-7.

"Maybe they grew overconfident," Mr. Matamoros said yesterday. "They have been strafing villages where allegedly we have bases."

The rebel forces don't have the downed helicopter, Mr. Matamoros said. But he said that they know it was flown by Cubans "from information and intelligence that we gathered."

"We intercepted communications," he said. "No matter how hard they try, the Cubans can't get away from their accent."

He said the fighting was part of a major campaign mounted in recent weeks by the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, the major fighting group of UNO, in the departments of Jinotega, Matagalpa and Zelaya.

Some Western military sources believed that a Sandinista Hind might have been shot down by the Honduran Air Force in a border clash last September. If so, it has not been confirmed.